

Book Reviews

Capitalizing on Learners' Individuality: From Premise to Practice

Authors:

Tammy Gregersen and Peter D. MacIntyre

Publisher:

Multilingual Matters, 2014

ISBN:

978-1-78309-119-5

Pages:

260

There are without doubt very few academic publications that would be as enlightening, inspiring, thought-provoking, reader-friendly, classroom-oriented and downright useful as the book by Tammy Gregersen and Peter D. MacIntyre *Capitalizing on Learners' Individuality: From Premise to Practice*. As the authors clarify in the introduction, "our book seeks to close the gap between theory and classroom application concerning individual differences in second or foreign language (FL) learning . . . This book is our attempt to wed pioneering research premises with innovative practices" (p. xiv), and it has to be admitted at the very outset that they have done a superb job of meeting this goal. The book opens with an introduction, which can be viewed as its integral and extremely important part because, in addition to the rationale for why the volume was put together and a brief description of the contents of the successive chapters, the reader will find here useful hints on how the book can most beneficially be used, how the various activities can be most successfully imple-

mented in the classroom, how they can be assessed, and how they can further be augmented with the use of technology. This is followed by seven chapters dealing with such aspects of individual learner variation as anxiety, beliefs, cognitive factors, namely aptitude, working memory and multiple intelligences, motivation, language learning strategies, language learning styles, and, finally, willingness to communicate. Each of these chapters is structured in a similar way and begins with a story which is intended to provide a down-to-earth illustration of the individual difference (ID) variable in question. Then come theoretical considerations which offer a brief overview of the key developments in the field, an action plan which delineates the ways in which a particular factor could be handled, and a number of practical activities that teachers can apply in their classrooms with an eye to enhancing their learners' self-awareness, autonomy and sense of well-being, ensuring at all times a supportive affective environment. What is of particular relevance from the perspective of the teacher, each of these activities is accompanied by the specification of the required proficiency level, the delineation of the procedure that should be followed, possible ideas for the assessment of the task, and, in many cases, a description of potential modifications that may need to be introduced in order to harness new technologies or cater to the needs of specific learners or learner groups. The volume closes with an epilogue which attempts to shed light on how the ID factors discussed throughout the book fit in together and how the complex interactions between them can be addressed in the classroom, adopting as a point of reference dynamic systems theory (e.g., de Bot, Lowie, Thorne, & Verspoor, 2013; Larsen Freeman & Cameron, 2008).

As I made clear at the beginning, I consider the volume to be a true gem and an urgent must-read for anyone interested in the role of individual learner differences in the process of second or foreign language learning and teaching, whether they are academics, university staff involved in teacher training, materials writers, teachers, or undergraduate, graduate and doctoral students. In the first place, the authors should be commended for the selection of the ID variables that they focus upon (i.e., anxiety, beliefs, cognitive abilities, motivation, learning strategies, learning styles and willingness to communicate) for the reason that they are not only of considerable interest to theorists and researchers and have undergone far-reaching modifications in recent years (e.g., Cohen, 2009; Dörnyei, 2005; Mercer, Ryan & Williams, 2013), but they are also of immediate relevance for practitioners who can truly capitalize on them to make the learning and teaching of foreign languages more efficacious. Second, the discussion of the selected ID variables is reflective of the latest advances in the field, notably their interpretation within the framework of dynamic systems theory (e.g., Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2009), which recognizes the

interrelatedness and constant fluctuation of different factors in response to a wide array of influences. What is particularly commendable, though, is that the authors do not leave the reader with the impression that, since individual differences are in a constant state of flux, little can be done to tap into them or shape them for the benefit of the learner, but in fact point to very concrete ways in which these goals can successfully be attained. They also strive, and to a large extent succeed in doing so, to resolve a number of theoretical conundrums, good examples being motivation (Chapter 4) and language learning strategies (Chapter 5). Third, Tammy Gregersen and Peter MacIntyre do a truly admirable job of linking theory, research findings and everyday classroom practice, taking the latest developments in theory and research as a point of departure for an action plan which will allow teachers to capitalize on individual differences. In each case, they also suggest a wide range of activities which are aimed, on the one hand, at increasing learners' proficiency in the target language and, on the other, raising their awareness, fostering their autonomy and ensuring a positive affective climate. It should also be emphasized that the inclusion of a story intended to stir teachers' and learners' imagination makes the discussion of the selected ID variables more convincing, more accessible and more easily relatable to teachers' everyday concerns. Moreover, all the activities are preceded with an inspirational quote or proverb which can help get students more involved, modifications are proposed for emergent learners and large classes, and useful suggestions are provided for the application of information and computer technologies, which may be particularly appealing to learners. It is also important that the authors do not rule out the use of learners' mother tongue "when it facilitates communication in the TL or when the affective benefits outweigh the linguistic costs" (p. xvii), a much-needed provision which enables the application of these activities with various proficiency levels and in diverse instructional settings. Finally, the value of the book also lies in the fact that the pedagogical recommendations it proposes are feasible and grounded in classroom realities, as is the case with the approach to multiple intelligences (pp. 74-79 in Chapter 3), where emphasis is laid on ensuring variety rather than trying to match instruction to individual preferences.

All the merits listed above dictate that the book is in many respects unique, it offers a number of fresh insights into individual learner differences and it will be of interest to wide audiences. It is indeed difficult to single out any major shortcomings and my only concern lies with the fact that the development of autonomy may not be achievable to the same extent in different contexts and with various learner groups. There are also different levels of autonomy (e.g., Benson, 2006), with the caveat that not all learners can be expected to take responsibility for their learning to the same extent, be it be-

cause of their personality, learning styles, beliefs or simply the goals they set for themselves. Teachers implementing the different activities in their classrooms should surely be aware of this qualification as unrealistic expectations in this respect can do more harm than good and jeopardize the accomplishment of the educational goals envisaged for a particular class or even the entire course. This could clearly have grave consequences in terms of academic achievement as, in most instructional settings, the effects of educational practices are evaluated by means of tests or formal examinations, the outcomes of which may greatly influence the future of the learner. The authors, however, recognize this danger and, where necessary, include comments urging some circumspection in this respect, as is visible in the chapter on beliefs (Chapter 2), where they state that "not all learners are equally autonomous and teachers must be more directive in some cases" (p. 40). Besides, it is ultimately the teacher who knows his or her learners best and should promote autonomy only to the degree to which it is warranted in a specific context. This comment, though, is only intended as a cautionary note and does not in the least affect my extremely favorable assessment of the book, which is undoubtedly an invaluable resource for anyone interested in the role of individual learner differences and the ways in which they can be dealt with in order to optimize second and foreign language learning and teaching. We could only wish that there were more publications of this kind focusing on other aspects of the complex process of instructed second language acquisition.

Reviewed by

Mirośław Pawlak

Adam Mickiewicz University, Kalisz, Poland

State School of Higher Professional Education, Konin, Poland

pawlakmi@amu.edu.pl

References

- Benson, P. (2006). Autonomy in language teaching and learning. *Language Teaching*, 40, 21-40.
- Cohen, A. D. (2009). Focus on the language learner: Styles, strategies and motivation. In R. Schmidt (Ed.), *An introduction to applied linguistics* (pp. 161-178). London: Hodder Education.
- DeBot, K, Lowie, W, Thorne, S. L., & M. Verspoor. (2013). Dynamic systems theory as a theory of second language development. In M. Mayo, M. Gutierrez Mangdao, & M. Adrián (Eds.), *Contemporary approaches to se-*

- cond language acquisition* (pp. 199-220). Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Dörnyei, Z. (2005). *The psychology of the language learner: Individual differences in second language acquisition*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Larsen-Freeman, D., & Cameron, L. (2008). *Complex systems and applied linguistics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Mercer, S., Ryan, S., & Williams, M. (Eds.). *Psychology for language learning: Insights from research, theory and practice*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.